DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 140 910 JC 770 355

AUTHOR Kates, Jack
TITLE Individual Conferences Versus Typed Comments Without Conferences on Graded Freshman English Composition Papers: The El Camino Experiment and the Compton Experiment.
PUB DATE Jun 77
NOTE 37p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Achievement Gains; Classroom Communication; Community Colleges; Comparative Analysis; *Composition (Literary); Conferences; *Feedback; Individual Instruction; *Junior Colleges; Response Mode; Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Response; *Teaching Methods; *Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

In order to determine the effectiveness of the tutorial method of individual conferences for communicating students' strengths and weaknesses in writing skills compared to the traditional method of returning correction-marked papers with only written comments on them, two experiments were conducted in which an experimental group and a control group at each of two colleges received identical instruction and wrote eight in-class essays which were graded on the basis of content, organization, mechanics, and syntax and diction. The experimental groups received feedback through conferencing while the control groups received feedback through written comments. The treatment of the experimental groups differed only in that one had three fifty-minute class meetings per week and had short conferences while the other group had one three-hour meeting per week and thus longer conferences were possible. Analysis of individual and mean group achievement showed that students who received feedback via conferencing had greater achievement gains than did students in the control group, although the gains were statistically significant only for one of the experimental groups. It was recommended that the conferencing method be employed in the teaching of composition. (JDS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED140910

INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES VERSUS TYPED COMMENTS WITHOUT CONFERENCES ON GRADED FRESHMAN ENGLISH COMPOSITION PAPERS:

THE EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

and

THE COMPTON EXPERIMENT

by

Jack Kates

during the fall semester, 1971

and

the spring semester, 1972

JC 720355

PREFACE

Although my research in writing skills is now considered to have contributed toward an increase in quality literacy, as is evident not only by the recent interest in writing skills but also by the current efforts of thousands of English composition instructors utilizing the "Kates Method" of individualized instruction in their classrooms, the research would not be complete without the report of my first two experiments on individualization. These experiments were conducted at two colleges during successive semesters, and their findings, which have not been published until now, are of utmost importance for two reasons: first, they actually contributed toward the development of the "Kates Method," which is now in very wide use throughout North America; and second, they laid the groundwork for my continuing research in writing skills, which includes the Report on the Kates Survey of College Freshman Composition Writing Skills: Sixteen First-Semester English Composition Classes from Eleven Community Colleges and Universities, ERIC, ED 077 498, June 1973, as well as the Santa Barbara County Experiment on Individualizing Ninth Grade English Composition : the Kates Method, the report of which has just been completed.

Jack Kates, Director
Writing Teachers In-Service Program
6505 Jaluit Street, Cypress, California 90630

June 1977

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
I.	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	1
II.	INTRODUCTION	2
III.	PROBLEM: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	4
IV.	SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	4
V.	HYPOTHESES: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	4
VI.	METHOD: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	5
VII.	RESULTS: EL CAMINO	11
VIII.	DISCUSSION OF RESULTS: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	12
IX.	CONCLUSION: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	13
X.	VARIABLES: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	15
XI.	SUMMARY: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT	19

I.	INTRODUCTION: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	21
II.	PROBLEM: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	21
III.	SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	21
IV.	HYPOTHESIS: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	22
V.	METHOD: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	22
VI.	RESULTS: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	27
VII.	DISCUSSION OF RESULTS: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	28
VIII.	CONCLUSION: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	29
IX.	SUMMARY: COMPTON EXPERIMENT	31
	FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS	33

I. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people for helping me with the El Camino and Compton experiments on writing skills.

Dr. Gerald Garlock, Coordinator of Institutional Research at El Camino College in Torrance, California, was most generous in advising me on many technicalities of procedure and control; and later, after I had concluded the experiment, he not only computed the results but offered me editorial advice. Without Dr. Garlock's assistance, these experiments would not have been so scientifically objective nor the results so accurate.

Mrs. R. B. Barnett, Coordinator of Institutional Research at Compton College in Compton, California, computed the results of the Compton experiment and graciously explained their significance.

Mr. Ben Ponnech of the Humanities Division at Compton College offered me valuable editorial criticism.

Mr. Harry L. Ruby, Dean of the Humanities Division at El Camino College, and Dr. John Grande, Dean of Instruction at Compton College, were very kind in granting me permission to conduct the experiment at their college and permission to publish the results.

II. INTRODUCTION

In order to determine the effectiveness of the tutorial method of conferencing students, for communicating their strengths and weaknesses in writing skills, as compared with the traditional method of merely writing comments on their correction-marked papers, this researcher decided to conduct two scientific experiments on the subject: one experiment at El Camino College in Torrance, California, during the fall semester of 1971; and the other experiment at Compton College in Compton, California, during the spring semester of 1972.

The experiments arose in an effort to answer the question of how to teach writing skills most effectively to students, a question that has long plagued the English composition instructor at all levels, particularly the instructor assigned to prepare his incoming freshmen for expository writing at the college level. What does the instructor do after he has drilled his students in the basic mechanical skills of punctuation, spelling, and grammar, and after he has reintroduced them to the topic sentence and the thesis and support outline? Usually he assigns them a reading selection, discusses the selection with them, and directs them into writing an essay on the subject. Then he collects their papers, reads them red-pencils in detailed mechanical and structural errors, and sometimes even writes extensive comments on the papers before returning them with a letter grade to the students. From that point on, he feels that his duties toward that particular assignment have been discharged and it is up to the student to benefit from the instructor's correction marks and comments.

The student, however, sees the returned paper from an entirely different

vantage point. More often than not, he gulps in his letter grade, scans the comments (if there are any), glances hurriedly at the correction marks, and sometimes even consults his correction key in an attempt to understand what the marks mean. Occasionally, if he is troubled over his paper, he may consult with his instructor immediately, if possible; otherwise he may make an appointment to see his instructor at a later date, if possible. However, for various reasons, appointments are not always possible to obtain, especially when one needs them the most. What, then, does the student do? If he is still concerned, he may take the paper home and study it, hopefully to figure out how he as a writer can improve, or how he can at least satisfy his instructor and thereby improve his own grade in future essays. But more often than not, he will almost immediately crumple up the paper and throw it toward the nearest wastepaper basket, again missing the mark by a substantial margin.

But even if the student is granted an appointment at a later date, will it be as meaningful to him then as it might have been at the ultimate moment of his frustration, when all factors contributing to the learning situation were working to his advantage? This researcher, on the basis of his observations during his years of teaching English composition at all levels, felt that the student would benefit more from individual conferencing during classtime when his paper was returned than he would from written comments on his paper without individual conferencing.

In order to prove his hypothesis, the researcher decided to conduct two scientific experiments on the subject, the first to take place at El Camino College in Torrance, California, during the fall semester of 1971, and the second--a follow up--to be conducted at Compton College in Compton, California, during the spring semester of 1972.

III. PROBLEM: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

The problem was to determine which was a more effective method of communicating to the student the strengths and weaknesses of his graded and correction-marked paper: individual conferences with the student at the time his paper was returned; or extensive, typed comments on the paper, without student conferences.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

If it could be scientifically determined that conferencing was a more effective method of instruction in the return of students' compositions than was the traditional method of writing comments on the students' papers, then the tutorial method of conferencing composition students might rightfully gain general acceptance by composition instructors interested in the latest and most effective methods of teaching their subject.

V. HYPOTHESES: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

It was hypothesized that the researcher, by administering a series of essays to be written in the classroom by his students involved in the experiment, could read and grade his students' essays on the basis of four criteria--content, organization, mechanics, and syntax and diction--and assign the essays a stanine composite score, which could be used for purposes of comparison in several ways, including comparisons of individual achievement, group achievement, ratios of achievement between groups, and correlation of achievement between groups.

It was further hypothesized that the group of students receiving individual conferences with their returned, graded papers would achieve significantly better in their written essays than would the group that

received extensively typed comments instead of conferences. The achievement would be determined by comparisons of pre-test and post-test mean group scores and by computing the t-ratio.

VI. METHOD: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

The design of the El Camino experiment was originally established to compare, through the use of mean stanine composite scores, the actual gains in writing skills and ratios of gains among three homogeneous groups of entering freshmen English composition students during a semester course of eight essay assignments, all of which were to be based on a question common to all groups, and all of which were to be written in class under controlled conditions.

Each class had an initial enrollment of thirty-five students, all of whom had been initially screened by the college for eligibility for the transfer course; they had either passed the Purdue Placement Test for English with an acceptable score, or they had passed a remedial English course with a grade of C or better at an accredited college.

One group, to be selected by random chance (drawing a button from a hat by a disinterested party), would be the control, whose students would receive their graded papers back collectively from the researcher in the traditional manner, that is, with correction marks and written comments on the papers, but without conferencing. The other two groups, acting as the experimental groups, would not receive written comments on their papers, but instead would receive a total of six individual conferences with their instructor when he returned their correction-marked papers to them, individually, during writing periods. Each student in both experimental groups was to be interrupted from his writing assignment and called up for an

individual conference, lasting approximately two minutes, during which time his paper would be discussed before being returned to him.

After the fourth writing assignment, the allotted time for writing was shortened to one fifty-minute period, thereby shortening individual conferences to approximately ninety seconds. The reason for this shortened writing period will be explained.

The course content, instruction, assignments, and grading were designed to be identical among the three classes; and the researcher himself acted as both instructor and grader to achieve this standardization.

Except for the first six weeks, during which time the students received intensive instruction in grammar and usage that might help them in their writing, the time spent in the course was devoted almost entirely to writing, and the students wrote in class practically every week.

As a major instructional tool for teaching organization, the instructor utilized not only the chalkboard but duplicated model student essays, which he handed to his classes two days prior to each writing assignment, and which his students were allowed to take home to study. These essays were part of his collection from both the previous semester and from the semester in progress. Except for the first essay, a process type of theme that was based on any analytical procedure the student wished to describe, the organizational pattern of all essays was fairly uniform. Essays number two and three were thesis and support types, essay number four was a critical analysis, and the remainder of the essays involved classification and a progressively more difficult type of critical analysis.

For content, the student was allowed to refer to any notes he had taken during classroom discussions of assigned writings and short stories as well as to the reading selections themselves, which served as a basis for all essays. Since all instruction was designed to be standardized, the

instructor's lead questions for the discussions were the same for all classes and attempted to focus on evidence likely to support a student's thesis in his next essay. Yet despite this emphasis by the instructor on the Socratic method as a major instructional tool for content, the instructor occasionally had to resort to the lecture method when a class failed to participate in discussions; otherwise the class would have been at a disadvantage with the content aspect of its papers.

The content aspect of the student's essay involved primarily the significance of what was said rather than how much was said. However, as a guideline, the suggested length for content, at the beginning of the experiment, was approximately three hundred words, and the time limit was set at one hundred minutes, that is, two fifty-minute periods. Since the time limit had to be controlled, the papers were collected at the end of one period and returned intact and without comment at the beginning of the next writing period. A disinterested party would check to see that each student had turned in a first draft. Writing periods were usually scheduled for Wednesdays and Fridays. If a student was absent for any reason during one of the writing periods, he was not given extra time for makeup but had to turn in his paper as a final draft at the end of the period. If he missed more than one writing period, his name was removed from the experiment altogether, because any extensive out of class makeups could not be considered valid under the controlled conditions of the experiment; and the instructor felt obligated to consider the student's welfare as having priority over the experiment. In short, the instructor did allow take-home makeups, but they were not included in the experiment.

The design was originally established to allow two complete fifty-minute periods for each writing assignment. However, the researcher soon discovered that these controlled conditions were being severely threatened

because of two factors: student absences during writing assignments, and student violations of their writing time limit. It became increasingly clear to him that it was unfair to penalize individual students for their legitimate absences from class; consequently, as just mentioned, he allowed makeups. But what disappointed him the most was his discovery, through the disinterested party, that approximately one-fifth of the experimental class had not turned in their first drafts during the fourth writing assignment and in effect might be cheating. The following writing period (for that same assignment), he questioned them about their lack of a first draft, and they admitted that they had taken their papers home in order to have more time to complete them. The instructor immediately penalized their papers to offset any advantage they might have gained; but in order to control similar conditions in the future, he shortened the writing time for all classes to only one period, that is, fifty minutes. Future makeups could then be controlled without inconvenience to anyone, the student taking his makeup immediately upon his return to class; and future papers could be collected at the end of the writing period without loss of advantage to anyone yet with fairness to all concerned. Since the actual length of the paper was not a criterion for grading, the instructor suggested that the student merely limit his subject and write a little less. A two hundred word paper would be acceptable for content, because the significance of what the student wrote was more important than how much he wrote. The final paper, however, could be longer, since it would be written as the final examination for the course, when a full two-hour period was allowed by the college. Regardless of the allotted time for writing, the criteria for grading remained constant.

Criteria for grading were based upon four equal items: content, organization, mechanics, and syntax and diction. Content, as already mentioned,

was based upon what the student wrote and in particular the significance of what he wrote. Organization included such requirements as an introductory paragraph containing an explicit thesis statement relating to the essay question, coherence between sentences and between paragraphs, development of paragraphs containing supporting evidence, and a concluding paragraph. Mechanics included spelling, punctuation, and basic usage. Finally, syntax and diction included sentence structure and the utilization of a variety of sentence patterns as well as the use of appropriate diction.

Each equally weighted criterion was graded on the stanine (standard scale of nine), with 1 representing the lowest possible grade, 2 and 3 representing below average work; 4, 5, and 6 representing varying degrees of the norm (C-, C, C+); and 7, 8, and 9 equivalent to above average grades of B- to B, B+ to A-, and A respectively. The grades were then averaged by adding them and dividing by four. The resultant composite stanine score could be used not only to compare degrees of acceptability, thus indicating to the student what progress he might be making at any stage of his writing, but more important to the experiment, the stanine could indicate during any assignment the progress that the class as a whole was making; and, finally, the stanine could compare the improvement or achievement of one class with that of another.

To ensure standardization in the grading, the researcher read and graded all the papers entirely by himself. And to prevent any prejudice in his grading, he required all of his students to conceal their identification on their papers. Each student, after printing his name and class period at the upper right hand corner of his paper, concealed the paper's identification by folding it over closed and stapling it to the paper, thus obscuring it from any possible view by the reader. The papers were

later coded by a disinterested party, who then mixed them all together, so that the researcher as the reader had absolutely no idea whose paper he was grading nor to what class period it belonged. Anonymity for the papers was thereby ensured.

After the researcher had read and graded all the papers, he handed them to a disinterested party, who then regrouped the papers by class period according to the anonymous code on the back of the papers which was known only to her. She then handed the graded but anonymous papers of the control group back to the researcher so that he could type comments for each paper. Finally, the disinterested party removed the staples and recorded the grades, just before handing back all the papers to the researcher immediately before the next writing period. As a result of these precautions, the only time the researcher saw the name on the paper was when he handed the student the graded paper.

This method was virtually foolproof against the researcher's recognizing an individual's paper; in fact even toward the end of the semester, the only leak of anonymity involved the papers of but two students because of their peculiar handwriting: one of the students from the control group, who, incidentally, received consistently outstanding grades; and another outstanding student from the third period experimental group, a group which later had to be eliminated from the experiment because of its unusually high absence rate during writing assignments, and because of its high drop-out rate, all of which in turn created conditions the researcher could not control for scientific accuracy. The results of the experiment, therefore, involved only two classes.

VII. RESULTS: EL CAMINO

Table 1. Experimental Group: Individual and Group Mean Stanine Essay Scores

Essay No.	No. of students receiving stanine of										Group Mean Stanine
	X	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
I			1	1	9	4	6	5	2		5.285
II	1			2	8	5	4	2	6		5.321
III	1				3	3	7	5	4	5	6.464
IV	6		1			5	4	7	2	3	5.109
V	2		1	2	1	3	4	6	5	3	5.928
VI	1		1	1		3	4	7	2	9	6.750
VII	1				1	2	1	9	6	8	7.250
VIII						3	3	7	6	9	7.535

Table 2. Control Group: Individual and Group Mean Stanine Essay Scores

Essay No.	No. of Students receiving stanine of										Group Mean Stanine
	X	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
I					5	5	11	2			5.434
II		1	1		4	6	2	6	3		5.521
III		1				2	7	7	2	4	6.695
IV			1	2	3	2	2	5	5	3	6.260
V					4	4	6	2	4	3	6.260
VI			1		4	3	6	4	3	2	6.043
VII					1	2	2	7	6	5	7.391
VIII					1	4	4	5	6	3	6.869

X=absent during essay

The results of the experiment involved only two classes, whose total participating enrollment for purposes of this experiment was fifty-one students: twenty-eight students in the experimental group; twenty-three students in the control.

The results of the experiment were computed on the basis of differences and ratios of differences between pre-test and post-test mean group scores, that is, differences for each group between mean composite stanine scores of essay number one and essay number eight. The t-ratio was computed to determine the significance of the results.

The experimental class showed both a greater absolute improvement and a greater rate of increase than did the control. The experimental group showed an actual improvement of 2,250 stanines, which is greater than one standard deviation. By contrast, the control group showed an actual improvement of 1.435 stanines, which is less than one standard deviation. The rate of increase for the experimental group was 42 percent, whereas the rate of increase for the control group was only 26 percent. In short, the increase of the experimental group was 14 percent greater than that of the control. However, a t-ratio of 1.54 indicated that these results were not significant at the 5 percent level of confidence.

VIII. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

Considering the dispersion of scores in Tables 1 and 2, one notes that the experimental group, during the first five essays, appeared to have more writers in both the superior and low-average categories than did the control group, thereby creating a wider dispersion of scores than was exhibited by the control group, whose scores appeared to cluster around the average to high-average categories throughout the experiment. The inference might be that the control group was a more homogeneous group than was the experimental group.

Considering the pre-test and post-test mean group scores, one notes that the experimental group did in fact achieve better than the control on two counts: first, by an actual gain of 2.250 stanines (more than one standard deviation), compared to 1.435 stanines (less than one standard deviation) for the control; and second, by a rate of increase calculated at 42 percent compared to 26 percent for the control. Hence, one might say that the actual stanine improvement for the control group was only 65 percent of that shown by the experimental group, and the control's rate of increase, similarly, was 14 percent less. On the basis of these figures alone, one might infer that conferencing proved to be a more effective method of instruction than the traditional method. However, the t-ratio, where t=1.54, indicates that the results are not significant at the 5 percent level of confidence.

A final interpretation of these results, based on the researcher's observation of variables, is that there may have been too many uncontrolled variables which might have affected the experiment and consequently the results.

IX. CONCLUSION: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

Of the two hypotheses postulated, the first was confirmed, but the second and most important hypothesis was not confirmed.

First, the researcher was able to administer a series of in-class essays to be written by several groups of students, grade the essays objectively on a stanine using the criteria he intended (content, organization, mechanics, and syntax), and utilize the composite stanine scores for his experiment in several ways, including comparisons of individual achievement, group achievement, ratios of achievement between groups, and correlation of achievement. If the experiment accomplished nothing else, it confirmed a reliable technique for grading composition papers.

Second, the experimental group receiving individual conferences did not achieve significantly better results in its mean scores than did the control group receiving no conferences. Although comparisons of pre-test and post-test mean group scores indicate that the experimental group performed better than did the control, both by an actual gain of 2.250 stanines compared to 1.435 stanines, and by a rate of increase calculated at 42 percent for the experimental group compared to 26 percent for the control, the t-ratio of 1.54 indicates that these results are not significant at the 5 percent level of confidence.

While this experiment failed to prove statistically that conferencing is a more effective method of communicating to the student his strengths and weaknesses in writing skills than is the traditional method of writing comments on the papers without conferencing, the experiment did not prove that conferencing is a less effective method. In fact, certain side benefits, such as a more positive attitude toward writing and an improved self image on the part of many students who may have received much needed encouragement through conferencing, were evident to the researcher. However, since these benefits involved psychological changes, they could not be measured by the researcher, and, therefore, can only be hypothesized. Perhaps it is impossible to reduce the humanities to formulation.

There were also other factors which the researcher noticed, some of which may have affected the experiment. Hence, the results of this experiment are open to question. Perhaps one of the major conclusions of this experiment is that it is extremely difficult to conduct statistically significant experimentation in the field of the humanities, because there are simply too many variables, many of which are almost impossible to control. An examination of these variables is now in order.

X. VARIABLES: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

Perhaps the most crucial variable, which obviously affected the experiment by imposing serious limitations on it, was the length of the class period itself--fifty minutes. The researcher concluded that the fifty-minute period, three times a week, is a fragmented time block that does not provide the best conditions for teaching or for learning freshman composition, particularly if the writing is to be done in class. Even if the time allocated for writing is spread over two or three consecutive periods, such a fragmented time block, which disrupts the student's continuity of thought during his composition and the instructor's conferencing and handling of makeups, does not contribute to experimental conditions that can be controlled.

The students for their part felt that it was bad enough to have their compositions interrupted even though they could complete them two days later; but after the fourth essay they complained bitterly that fifty minutes was hardly enough time to organize, write, proofread, and rewrite an acceptable essay. Their view is shared by the researcher who, from his vantage point, further emphasizes that two minutes is less than ideal time to conference with a student, and the value of a ninety second conference is questionable altogether. How much can one communicate to a student in only ninety seconds?

As a result of his speculation on what the results might have been if the length of the class period had been a longer one (perhaps seventy-five minutes), thereby allowing the student ample time to begin and complete his assignment on the same day, and, moreover, allowing the instructor the advantage of being able to control makeups and to increase his conference time with each student, the researcher concluded that the length of the

class period itself was the most crucial variable of the experiment; therefore, it must be controlled in future, similar experiments. The researcher felt that the ninety-minute period twice a week would be an improvement, but the ideal time block would be a three-hour period, once a week.

Another variable that affected the experiment was the size of the class itself. Although the results of the experiment include only twenty-eight students in the experimental group, the actual class size was thirty-one. Throughout the course the experimental class remained large in comparison to the control class, which had only twenty-four active students. The large class size created certain environmental conditions, such as overcrowding, that were less than ideal. Furthermore, because of the large class size, the individual student's time allocated to conferencing was shortened. This factor, of course, was crucial. But even the conferencing itself might have been more effective, the researcher believed, had he become more familiar with his students, as might have happened in a smaller class. Consequently, the researcher concluded that his effectiveness as an instructor and as a tutor were inversely proportional to the size of the class. The smaller the class, the more effective, he felt, would be his instruction and his conferencing.

Still another variable which may have affected the experiment was the hour of the day. Not everyone can perform well when he is tired and hungry. The experimental class at noon hour was unusually lethargic, possibly because its students had not yet eaten lunch. By contrast, the control class, one hour later, was almost always rambunctious and appeared eager to begin the afternoon session. As a result of his observations of this behavior pattern, the researcher questions the wisdom of scheduling classes during the noon hour.

In addition to the previously mentioned variables, which the researcher believes can be controlled, there were other variables, perhaps uncontrollable, which may have affected the experiment.

The class makeup itself, a random variable, certainly affected the experiment. Although the population of both classes was assumed to be homogeneous and comparable to each other, the fact is that each class differed of course in its makeup of individual personalities, which for discussion purposes could be classified according to intelligence, perceptiveness, talent, writing background, and--most important of all--attitude. Ultimately it is the student's attitude itself that determines how he will approach his assignment; and attitude is dependent upon so many factors or variables, only a scant few of which have been mentioned.

The experimental class as a whole exhibited several behavioral patterns which were opposite to those observed in the control class. For example, the experimental class remained unusually lethargic throughout the entire semester. This trait was exhibited in several ways. The class as a whole failed to participate actively in classroom discussions, in sharp contrast to the control, and their individual comments appeared to be less perceptive than those of the control group. But not only did the students from the experimental group fail to become positively involved, they failed to react negatively. For one thing, they remained enrolled and did not drop the course. Consequently, the experimental group continued as a very large and res[illegible]ed class, again in contrast to the control, which shrank by almost one-third, becoming eventually even more cohesive, informal, and outgoing than it had been originally.

The study habits of the control group appeared to be superior to those of the experimental group: the control group took notes, which they referred

to while writing the essays; the experimental group, with the exception of a few of its students, took no notes at all.

Yet another difference in attitude between the classes was apparent in their adherence to regulations. The experimental class violated the rules; the control class did not. Finally, the experimental class had several absences during scheduled writing periods; the control class had none.

Whether it was because of these differences in attitude just mentioned, or because of the hour of the day, or because of some other factors not evident to the researcher, the control class appeared to involve itself in the course much more enthusiastically than did the experimental class, the result of which may have affected the researcher's attitude toward both classes. It is much easier to respond to a small, enthusiastic group than it is to a large, indifferent group, placid in its lethargy.

As with any experiment, it might be interesting to speculate on what the results might have been if the groups had been reversed. Even excluding attitude differences between groups, the key factor may have been size; the researcher believes the experimental students would have gained a significant advantage if their conference time had been lengthened.

One final factor to consider, even though it was controlled as much as was humanly possible, may still have had variable results. This factor was the grading system itself. Although only one person--the researcher himself--graded all the papers, and although their anonymity was preserved, the researcher will be the first to admit that one's mood changes not only from day to day but from hour to hour, and his mood is no exception. The first paper picked up to be graded by him might have received an inferior grade or a superior grade, as the case might be, but it might not necessarily have received that particular grade had it been on the bottom of the pile when he

got to it some five hours later. Grading a piece of writing, no matter how precise one may be, is very often arbitrary; and except for the basic rules of grammar and mechanics, there are no absolute standards. Perhaps it is therefore impossible to obtain absolutely valid results in experiments of this type that involve the humanities. However, the researcher still believes that even though the results obtained in such experiments may not be totally valid, the more scientifically accurate they are, the more they will benefit everyone concerned.

XI. SUMMARY: EL CAMINO EXPERIMENT

In order to determine the effectiveness of the tutorial method of conferencing students for communicating their strengths and weaknesses in writing skills as compared with the effectiveness of the traditional method of returning their correction-marked papers with only written comments on them, this researcher conducted an experiment involving three classes of entering freshmen English composition students, two classes of which completed the experiment at El Camino College in Torrance, California, during the fall semester of 1971. Each group, receiving virtually identical instruction by the researcher, wrote a total of eight essays in class, all of which were read and graded solely by the researcher. A composite stanine score based on four criteria--content, organization, mechanics, and syntax and diction--was used to compare individual as well as group achievements, and a t-ratio determined the significance of the results.

All twenty-eight students in the experimental group received six individual conferences with their instructor (four two-minute conferences and two ninety-second conferences) in place of written comments on their returned, correction-marked papers. The control group received only extensive, typed comments on the returned papers.

The experimental group showed both a greater absolute gain (2.250 stanines) and a greater rate of increase (42 percent) than did the control group, whose gain was 1.435 stanines and whose rate of increase was 26 percent. Although the experimental group's gain was greater than one standard deviation as compared with the gain of less than one standard deviation for the control, a t-ratio of 1.54 indicated that these results were not significant at the 5 percent level of confidence.

The researcher concluded that certain variables which affected his experiment must be more carefully controlled in future experiments of this nature, in order to produce more scientifically valid results. The most crucial of these variables was the length of the class period itself, which should be lengthened to at least seventy minutes for several reasons: in order to provide ample time for the student to begin and to complete his essay in class; in order to provide ample time for individual conferences, which should last a minimum of three minutes; and in order to control make-ups. Other recommendations included a smaller class size, which would allow more time for conferencing; and the elimination of noon hour for scheduling classes because of the students' lethargy during that hour.

The researcher felt that more experimentation should be done in this area, but tighter controls and the introduction of new elements should be brought in.

I. INTRODUCTION: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

As a follow up to his El Camino experiment on conferencing and writing skills, this researcher conducted a similar experiment at Compton College in Compton, California, during the spring semester of 1972. The problem, its significance, and the hypothesis had not changed. However, since the researcher was able to benefit from his previous project and its recommendations, in that he was now able to control several variables and to introduce an additional element into his Compton experiment, the method to be described will be somewhat different, as will be the results and conclusion, both of which are significantly different from those described in the previous experiment.

II. PROBLEM: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

The problem was to determine which was a more effective method of communicating to the student the strengths and weaknesses of his graded and correction-marked paper: individual conferences with the student at the time his paper was returned; or extensive, typed comments on the paper, without student conferences.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

If it could be scientifically determined that conferencing was a more effective method of instruction in the return of students' compositions than was the traditional method of writing comments on the students' papers, then the tutorial method of conferencing composition students might rightfully gain acceptance by composition instructors interested in the latest

and most effective methods of teaching their subject.

IV. HYPOTHESIS: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

It was hypothesized that the group of students receiving individual conferences with their returned, graded papers would achieve significantly better in their written essays than would the group that received extensively typed comments instead of conferences. The achievement would be determined by comparisons of pre-test and post-test mean group scores and by computing the t-ratio.

V. METHOD: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

The general design of the Compton experiment was comparable with that of the El Camino experiment in the following aspects: basic procedure, instruction, number and type of writing assignments, criteria for grading, grading procedure, and methods of statistical analysis. However, the Compton experiment was an improvement over its predecessor in at least two respects: it had much more effective controls; and its schedule, a weekly, three-hour unified time block, was ideally suited for the experiment.

The design of the Compton experiment was established to compare, through the use of mean stanine composite scores, the actual gains in writing skills and ratios of gains between two homogeneous groups of second-semester freshmen English composition students during a semester course of six essay assignments, all of which were to be based on a question common to all groups, and all of which were to be written in class under controlled conditions.

As in the El Camino experiment, the control group, which was selected by random chance (drawing a button from a hat), received its graded papers back collectively from the researcher in the traditional manner, that is,

with correction marks and written comments on the papers, but without conferencing; whereas the students in the experimental group did not receive typed comments on their papers, but instead received a total of five conferences with their instructor when he returned their correction-marked and graded papers to them individually, during their writing period. (They were not conferenced on their final paper.)

The course content, instruction, assignments, and grading for the two classes were identical. The course itself was geared toward writing, and practically all instruction as well as the discussions were directed toward that end. The researcher himself acted as both the instructor, reader, and grader, employing the same grading techniques and standards that he had employed in the El Camino experiment.

As a major instructional tool for teaching organization, the instructor utilized the chalkboard, the overhead projector, and model student essays, the latter of which he either read aloud just before the writing assignment or duplicated ahead of time for his students to take home and study.

The organization pattern of all essays was virtually identical inasmuch as the essay questions were uniform in nature and did not vary at all after the second essay. The first two essays required the student to employ an extended definition in order to "explain the author's purpose" for the short story. The student had an option of several stories, and an option of three designated reasons for the author's purpose: to reflect a slice of life, to depict character, or to highlight a particular theme. Only one purpose was required. The third and succeeding essays were more difficult in their organizational pattern, for they required the student to employ not only extended definition but classification and critical analysis as well. The

question was: "What was the author's purpose, and what elements of fiction (conflict, point-of-view, etc.) did he employ with effect to achieve his purpose?" The organization required an explicit thesis statement referring to the question and at least three major, well developed supports from the reading selection itself or from the classroom discussions on the selection. All essays were based on a list of assigned short stories from an anthology and on one, unpublished contemporary short story. The student could refer to his open book and to any notes he had taken during the classroom discussions of the short stories.

Since the course was a second-semester course in which it was assumed that the students already had a background of basic writing skills, little time was spent on grammar and usage instruction or on mechanical skills, except as they pertained to an individual's writing. The instructor spent only about six hours in the entire semester lecturing on certain aspects of mechanics and sentence structure which were causing problems among the students generally. He also made available programmed instructional material in these areas, material which the students were encouraged to take home. For the greatest part of the course, though, the instruction focused on organization and on critical analysis of short stories during the classroom discussions. And, as previously mentioned, the entire course was geared toward writing.

Criteria for grading the students' papers were identical to those employed in the El Camino experiment; that is, they were based upon four equally weighted items: content, organization, mechanics, and syntax and diction. Each item was graded on the stanine, and the four items were then averaged to obtain a composite stanine score, which was used to calculate the group mean scores for comparisons of achievement. The identical precautions to those employed at El Camino were also used at Compton to guarantee

the anonymity of all papers, both individually and collectively as groups. The researcher was never able to detect whose paper he was grading nor to what group it belonged.

The Compton experiment, however, differed considerably from it predecessor in at least two respects: the Compton experiment had much tighter controls that proved almost totally effective; and the controls provided ample time for instruction, for the writing of essays in class, for the control of makeups, and for individual conferences. In short, the Compton experiment, by adopting the recommendations of the El Camino experiment, benefited both the students and the researcher, and provided ideal experimental conditions.

Instead of having to adapt itself to three fragmented periods a week, the Compton experiment utilized an evening schedule of one, weekly three-hour period, which provided many advantages. Instruction and classroom discussions took place one week, with writing and conferencing the following week. The students were allowed to utilize two continuous hours during their writing assignments, thereby completing the assignment the same day they began it without interruptions, except for the conferences in the experimental group, when the students were called up individually to have their graded papers discussed, after which they could return to their writing. If a student missed an assignment one week, he was allowed to take a makeup immediately upon his return to class or he could take it home. However, all makeups were penalized two stanine points to offset any advantage the student might gain through them, and, moreover, no makeup scores were included in the results of the experiment. Furthermore, students who missed either the pre-test or post-test were excluded from the experiment.

Another advantage gained by the researcher in the Compton experiment was its smaller class size. The Compton experimental group had only twenty-one students in the class as compared with thirty-one at El Camino. (Not all students at either school were included in the experimental results, but they were all conferenced throughout the course.) Because of this smaller class size in addition to the longer conferencing period, the researcher was able to spend approximately seven minutes conferencing each student, and occasionally he was able to spend ten minutes conferencing each of his weaker students, who were particularly deficient in basic writing skills.

As a result of the identical time slot in the scheduling for each class, 7:00 PM-9:50 PM weekly, there was no discernable difference in attitude between the two classes as was evident in the noon hour experimental class at El Camino. If fatigue or hunger affected one class at Compton, it affected both. Nor was there any noticeable difference between the two classes in classroom participation. Both appeared very comparable. In fact it appeared to the researcher that both courses were almost identical in nature, and the experimen proceeded under ideal conditions. The only negative aspect arose from unexpected absences during the final writing assignment, when several students from both groups failed to appear in class on that particular evening. And since the researcher wanted to count only those essays which were written under absolutely controlled conditions, that is, under his observation, he disqualified all makeups for the experiment. The results of the experiment, therefore, include only those students who were present in class for both the pre-test and post-test essays: fourteen students in the experimental group and thirteen in the control.

VI. RESULTS: COMPTON

Table 1. Experimental Group: Individual and Group Mean Stanine Essay Scores

Essay No.	No. of Students receiving stanine of										Group Mean Stanine
	X	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
I		5	1	1	1	1	1	2	2		4.0
II		2	3	2	2	1		1	2	1	4.0
III		1		2		2	2	3	3	1	5.93
IV			1	1	1	1	3	4		3	6.21
V					3	3		2	1	5	6.71
VI					3	1	1	2	1	6	7.0

Table 2. Control Group: Individual and Group Mean Stanine Essay Scores

Essay No.	No. of Students receiving stanine of										Group Mean Stanine
	X	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
I		1	3	2	1		1	2	3		4.70
II				1	3	3	1	1	3	1	5.85
III	1			2	3	2	1	2	1	1	5.40
IV	1	1			1	2	1	4	2	1	5.69
V	1			2		2	1	3	3	1	5.85
VI			1	2	2	2	1	1	4		5.46

X=absent during essay

The results of the Compton experiment involved twenty-seven students: fourteen in the experimental group, and thirteen in the control.

The results of the experiment were computed on the basis of differences and ratios of differences between pre-test and post-test mean group scores, that is, differences for each group between mean composite stanine scores of essay number one and essay number six. The t-ratio was computed to determine the significance of the results.

The experimental class performed better than did the control, both by an absolute gain of 3.0 stanines (greater than one standard deviation) compared to 0.76 stanines (less than one standard deviation) for the control; and by a rate of increase calculated at 75 percent compared to only 6.1 percent for the control. The t-ratio of -2.66 indicates that the difference between the mean gains of the two classes is sufficient to warrant the conclusion that the experimental class performed better than did the control as a result of the experiment by a probability of at least 95 to 5.

VII. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

Considering the scores of the first two essays, one notes that the experimental group appeared lower in its writing skills than did the control, particularly in the lower category (1, 2, and 3.) Perhaps even more noticeable is the large number of writers in the experimental group who scored in the lowest stanine. These writers were obviously extremely deficient in basic writing skills.

By contrast, the control group in essay number two had no writers in the two lowest stanines (1, and 2), and only one writer in the third stanine; that is, the control group had only one writer scoring below average as compared with seven in the experimental group, five of whom were very much below average.

After essay number two, the experimental group achieved a significant gain and maintained a gradual increase thereafter; whereas the control group showed a decrease in its third essay, and only slight gains thereafter until the final essay, when it again showed a decrease.

One will recall that the organizational pattern of the essays increased in difficulty after the second essay, but remained constant thereafter. This organizational difficulty may have affected the essays of those students unable to understand the critical comments on their papers. The experimental group appeared to encounter no such difficulty.

The final results of the experiment indicate conclusively that the experimental class performed better than did the control. The experimental class gained 3.0 stanines (more than one standard deviation) compared to 0.76 for the control (less than one standard deviation). The rate of increase for the experimental class was 75 percent compared to 6.1 percent for the control. Finally, the t-ratio of -2.66 indicates that these results are significant by a probability of at least 95 to 5.

VIII. CONCLUSION: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

The hypothesis was confirmed. The group of students that received individual conferences upon the return of their graded papers achieved significantly better in their written essays than did the group that received extensively typed comments instead of conferences. The achievement was determined by comparisons of pre-test and post-test mean group stanine scores and by computing the t-ratio.

The experimental class, which received the conferences, performed better than did the control class, both by an absolute gain of 3.0 stanines compared to 0.76 stanines, and by a rate of increase of 75 percent compared

to 6.1 percent for the control. The t-ratio of -2.66 indicates that these results are significant by a probability of at least 95 to 5.

Since both classes were virtually identical in nature and differed only in the method by which the researcher communicated to the student the strengths and weaknesses of the correction marked, graded paper upon its return, one must conclude that the additive effect occurred in that area, through conferencing, causing the experimental group to perform better than did the control. In short, the tutorial method of conferencing proved to be superior to the traditional method of writing comments on students' papers.

Although the sample included in the final results of the experiment appears small, the actual number of participating students in each class throughout the experiment was average: twenty-one students in the experimental class; twenty-seven in the control. However, since the researcher was able to utilize a two-hour time block for conferencing, he was able to devote as much as ten minutes per student to his lowest achievers, thereby not only giving them much needed encouragement, but also giving them much needed help with writing skills, particularly through his explanation of organization, an aspect of writing which they found extremely difficult to comprehend.

By contrast, the students in the control group, who received his criticism through his typed comments, were for the most part left to their own devices. The researcher concludes that they did not understand certain intricacies of organization as well as they might have understood them if they had been conferenced. Furthermore, some of the low achievers might have benefited from the personal touch of conferencing.

On the basis of the results of this experiment and on the basis of the

researcher's observations, he concludes that the tutorial method of conferencing is superior to the traditional method of instruction, especially with average achieving and low achieving students. He further concludes that individual conferences should last at least three minutes, and longer if at all possible, especially with low achieving students. In order to facilitate this type of conferencing in class, he recommends a fairly small class size, not to exceed twenty-five students, and a continuous time block of at least ninety minutes, but preferably three hours.

IX. SUMMARY: COMPTON EXPERIMENT

In order to determine the effectiveness of the tutorial method of conferencing students for communicating their strengths and weaknesses in writing skills as compared with the effectiveness of the traditional method of returning their correction-marked papers with only written comments on them, this researcher, as a follow up of his previous semester's El Camino experiment, conducted an experiment involving two classes of second semester freshmen English composition students at Compton College in Compton, California, during the spring semester of 1972. Each group, receiving virtually identical instruction by the researcher, wrote a total of six essays in class, all of which were read and graded solely by the researcher. A composite stanine score based on four criteria--content, organization, mechanics, and syntax and diction--was used to compare individual as well as group achievements, and a t-ratio determined the significance of the results.

All twenty-one students in the experimental group, of whom only fourteen were present in class for the post-test, received five individual conferences with their instructor. The conferences lasted approximately seven minutes each, and were designed to take the place of extensively typed comments on the student's returned, correction-marked papers. By contrast, the twenty-

seven students in the control group, thirteen of whom were present for the post-test, received the typed comments with their returned papers. The results of the experiment included only those students who had been present for both the pre-test and post-test.

The experimental group showed both a greater absolute gain (3.0 stanines) and a greater rate of increase (75 percent) than did the control group, whose gain was 0.76 stanines and whose rate of increase was 6.1 percent. The t-ratio of -2.66 indicated that these results were significant by a probability of at least 95 to 5.

The researcher concluded that the tutorial method of conferencing was superior to the traditional method of writing comments on students' papers, especially with average and low achieving students, and especially if the conferencing time with each student could last a minimum of three minutes. In order to provide time in class for such conferencing, the researcher recommended that the class size be limited to about twenty-five students, and that the class be scheduled so that it would have a time block of at least ninety minutes, and preferably three hours.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of having conducted two experiments on writing skills and conferencing at two different colleges and at two different times, and as a result of the success of his Compton experiment, this researcher would like to make the following recommendations.

When at all possible, the writing instructor should try to incorporate into his course individual conferencing with his students in order to communicate to them the strengths and weaknesses of their papers, and in order to provide encouragement for those who need it. The effectiveness of conferencing appears to be directly proportional to the amount of time devoted to the individual student. Within reasonable limits, such as ten or fifteen minutes per student, the longer these conferences last, the more effective they are. But even a two or three minute conference is superior to more written comments on the paper. Therefore, even when the instructor encounters adverse conditions to conferencing (and to teaching), conditions such as a large class size and a fragmented time block of three, weekly one-hour periods, he should still try to adapt his course to conferencing by scheduling his writing periods in class over two or possibly three class periods, if necessary. He will thereby provide time for conferencing, or at least time for the conferencing of his lower achievers, who stand the most to gain by such conferencing.

Perhaps more research could be done in this area.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIF.
LOS ANGELES

AUG 19 1977

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGES